

[A Belated Rest]

Approximately 2,600 words SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: A BELATED REST

Date of First Writing February 7, 1939

Name of Person Interviewed David Brown (Negro)

Fictitious Name Dave Thomas

Street Address 810 Tree Street

Place Columbia, S. C.

Occupation Farmer

Name of Writer Verner Lea

Name of Reviser State Office

The house was low and rambling. Along the front ran a low veranda, with a trellis of wistaria proudly displaying the purple clusters that the spring-like February sun had lured from wintry wrappings. A rustic picket fence and a gate that creaked on its hinges enclosed a plot of green grass, rose cuttings, and a bright red plant of flowering quince, which was in full bloom.

The creaking of the gate hinges disturbed the slumber of the [?][?][?] 2 scrawny yellow hound next door, and he yelped his grievance so that all in the neighborhood might hear.

Library of Congress

But none in that house seemed to hear or, if hearing, to heed the noisy remonstrance. Nor did knocking at the door bestir any movements about the house. Only the flowers, newly worked vegetable garden, and chickens leisurely nipping about gave evidence that this peaceful place was tenanted.

Reluctant to allow the call to prove fruitless, I ventured into the rear of the premises. There, peaking about among the hen's nests was the ancient object of my search, Dave Thomas. Dave is a gray-haired Negro, bowed under the weight of seventy years. And, [clad?] that afternoon in a suit of gray, a gray felt hat, with only gold-rimmed spectacles to vary the color tone, he looked the symbol of the wintry end of life. He was a neatly dressed symbol, however, and one very much alive, as he moved nimbly among the nests, lustily calling his chickens, and, by way of reward for their industry, throwing handfuls of corn among them.

As he turned and saw me, he removed his battered old gray hat and bowed in the style of a true Southern gentleman. "Missus, let me get shed of these eggs, and we'll go round to the front and set. Joe, come here, son, and put these eggs in the house. Set 'em up on that high shelf. Don't put 'em no place handy for that onery hound.

"I can't get about as spry as I could once, Missus. 'Reckon old age is creepin' on me. But I can't complain. I was born in the Wateree section of South Carolina, March 1, 1869.

"I lived on Mr. M. C. Harmon's plantation and farmed on shares. We planted mostly cotton. But we raised corn, sweet potatoes, peas, and near 'bout everything to eat. We made fine crops, 'cept when the spring freshets come. We lost a many a bushel of fine corn in them freshets. But we always had chickens and eggs and other things to sell.

"I use to bring vegetables, chickens, and eggs to Columbia every Saturday. That was before the city had any kind of market.

"On Friday afternoon, I'd get all of my produce ready for sale the following day. Then I'd get up before day and drive old Pete into town. I'd go from house to house sayin', 'Fresh

Library of Congress

eggs, spring chickens, green peas, butter beans. Just anything your appetite calls for, Dave's got it.' I never slackened my mule's pace, nor ceased my produce chant, 'till all was sold. Then I'd buy sugar and coffee, and such as that, and take back home.

"I remember when old man Drake, the meat man, lived in North Columbia. He had a big mulberry tree in his front yard. He use to hang fresh meat and hams on the limbs of that tree, then drape it with yards of link sausage.

"Them was the days before people had refrigerators, and that mulberry tree served as his meat market. The only way people got ice then was to buy it from a wagon that went all 'round town, with the driver ringing a bell. Mr. Drake would sit on a box, lean up against that tree, smoke his pipe and doze, 'til he'd hear a wagon or a buggy rattlin' down the road. Then Jute, a Negro boy that he hired, would start ringing a bell to advertise their goods. Mr. Drake was a good business man. They tell me he made plenty money in them days. That same family been in the meat market business for generations.

"It's jus' down right uncanny to me, how times have changed. When 4 I first remember Columbia, there wasn't fifteen two-story buildings on Main Street. I knew all of the old families in town. The English home stood right where you see Allen University now. The Arthur home was right across from there. Wasn't nothing in that section then but woods. My father was emancipated from the English family. He was their coachman all durin' slavery times. And he never voted anything but the democratic ticket.

"When I first come of age, I went to Sumter County and worked on the farm of Mr. Frank Lucas. I didn't stay there long, though; I liked around Camden better. So I went on back to that section of the Wateree.

"We had big times in them days. On the west side of the Wateree, the game was plentiful. We could hunt and fish a great deal. I use to take people from Columbia huntin'. We would hunt duck, turkey, and deer, and one time we went bear huntin'. One day I took Mr. Whit Boykin and a friend of his from Camden. They killed a crocus sackful of quail in one day.

Library of Congress

They had fine bird dogs, and I always kept good dogs, too. People hear about me from all over the State and come and get me to take 'em huntin'.

"One day I was settin' on the bank a-fishin'. I met up with a white man, name Mr. Bobo, and a Negro. We decided to go to the swamp, huntin'. First thing we know, the dog had treed a coon up a hollow tree. We couldn't climb that tree. So Mr. Bobo climbed a tree right next to it. He reached out and shook the limb the coon was on. Instead of jumpin' out of the tree, that coon lit right down the hollow and committed suicide. Yes, sir, when we found him his neck was broke. First time I ever see a 5 coon jump in, 'stead of out of a tree.

"I use to set fox traps and bait 'em with burned sweet potato. That's the best fox bait there is. Lots of times the fox would just uncover the traps and steal the bait. A fox is one of the hardest animals to catch, and none is as sly or as wild. They use to be powerful bad about catchin' our chickens on the plantation.

"Marse Harmon use to tell me I could do more with hound dogs, goats, and mules than anybody. Said I had a way of persuasion, when they'd get contrary and stubborn, that he didn't have. He said a white man never could get as close to a hound dog as a nigger could."

The father of eleven children and one grandchild. Dave's pride and utter satisfaction was manifested in speaking of his family. His expression was illuminating to gaze upon as he sat and recalled bygone days.

"I got the best wife a man was ever blessed with. If I ever lose her, I don't aim to ever take another.

"While me and Maria was a-courtin', a young bigoty mulatto come over in our settlement. He made it his business to cut in on me and my girl. Maria jus' give me the cold shoulder. She jus' fell for his sly glances, city ways, and big talk. At times, I'd most grieve my heart out. I wanted to marry Maria more than anything I ever wanted in my life. So I jus' set and

Library of Congress

study and bide my time, while she was out gallivantin' around with this furriner. One day a couple of my friends come to me and said they'd fix that bastard's hash. They invited him to go huntin' with them the followin' Saturday night.

"I went on down to the swamp ahead of them. I set down on a log to wait. Finally I heard voices. They keep comin' a little closer. Soon 6 I see it was time for me to grab my nigger. What I mean, I grabbed him, too. He scowled at me and showed his teeth in a wicked grin, same as a 'possum. He drew back his fist to hit me. But his aim was as crooked as he was. When I got through with him, I reckon he figured a wild cat must 'o jumped out of a tree and lit on him.

"I said: 'As nigger to nigger, if the sun rises on your ashy hide in this section again, it will be jus' too bad.' Then I give him a kick and turned him loose in the Wateree Swamp. Whether he ever lived to get out I don't know. What's more, I never bothered my head about it. All I know is that I made it so unhealthy for him, it didn't take him long to make tracks for some place else.

"Maria thought for a long time that he jus' up and desert her. Then she lost all respect for him and said she was glad to get shed of him. I didn't tell her what happened to that nigger for a long time. Not 'til I got her back, anyhow.

"Me and Maria been married forty years. We had big times in the old days. We had old time square dances every Saturday night. I would call the figures and pat. I mean them boys that made the music could sho' make a fiddle and a guitar talk. Them was good days.

"I remember well when Hampton was elected governor. I saw the torch-light parade of the Red Shirts. One in the parade give me a red shirt, and I wore it on the farm.

"When I first moved to Columbia, I got a job as janitor at the National Loan and Exchange Bank, where I worked for fifteen years. Three years before I built, I paid a hundred dollars for the land where this house stands. I built my house fifteen years ago. I made a down

Library of Congress

payment, then 7 paid so much each month. I have seven rooms, lights, and water. All but two of the houses on this street are owned by Negroes.

"Five of my oldest children are in New York. All have good jobs and a high school education. The girls have government employment. Two sons are employed at the shipyard. Two of the boys at home serve as caddies at Forest Lake golf course after school hours. My baby daughter goes to the North Carolina mountains every summer and serves as maid. If I do say it, she is a smart girl. She takes pride in her work and goes up against anything with courage and confidence. She is eighteen years old.

"Me and Maria was raised in the same community and went to the country school. The children in our days didn't have the same advantages that they have this day and time. Mine don't pass any opportunity by. They are industrious and eager to learn.

"Me and my wife never had any trouble with our children. 'Course the boys give a little trouble, jus' like all boys; but the girls are nice, and never have give us any trouble or worry. All of 'em are good to me and their ma. Everytime they get paid they send us part.

"My oldest son is the only one ever married, and his wife is dead.

He's been after my wife for a long time to come to New York and see him. He says he'll pay her way and show her all the sights. But she says that's too far away from home. So he's planning to come down here for a spell this summer. My baby daughter wants to go back with him, but I can't let all the children leave.

"I can't get about much now. I go out in the garden and piddle around a little. Feed my chickens and such. That's about all the exercise I get. Of late, 'seem like rheumatism is settled in my joints. I never go up town, 8 'cept on business.

Library of Congress

"I went to see President Roosevelt when he was here. I also went to Governor Maybank's inauguration. We are members of the Second Calvary Baptist Church. But I can't even get out to meetin' often.

"Now my wife is right smart younger than I am. She gets about pretty good. She goes out and cleans house for a lady two days out of each week.

"I enjoy my friends, and have a right smart of company. Two of the boys in the neighborhood come by every Saturday night and give me a little concert. One plays the fiddle and one the guitar. To hear'em sing and play and pat their feet brings back old times. I've got good neighbors, and all of 'em seem to think a heap o' me." This remark was strikingly demonstrated among young and old as they passed Dave's home. Each with a cordial greeting to this old man.

Now after a period of more than three score years, Dave Thomas is taking a belated rest. In the sanctity and security of his home, life is peaceful and quiet, with glowing memories of happy days spent in the Wateree section of South Carolina.